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Situational triggering factors - adult's "readiness to learn"- connected to certain life-stages and age?

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Abstract

New research findings concerning adult's participation in learning, supports earlier studies, indicating that participation in adult learning are frequently caused by certain changes or situations in adults lives. Such situations can become situational triggering factors that updates and actualize participation in learning. Theories used to explain such situational triggering factors are often connected to life stage and lifespan theories, indicating that triggering factors for participation in adult learning are connected to certain stages in adult's life and development, closely related to a person's age. Findings presented in this paper indicate that triggering factors not necessary are tightly associated with certain age or within phases in the lifespan.

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1. Introduction

In articles published in Adult Education Quartely (Jacobs, 1959; Whaley & Whaley, 1967; Elias, 1979; Merriam & Mullins, 1981; Knox, 2002), the concept "readiness to learn" is used in not less than two different ways. One definition deals with the development of the ability to be self-directed in the learning process, while another definition is associated with the "right" time for participation in adult learning and studies (Knowles, 1988; Rubenson, 2000). Both definitions are originally associated with a lifespan perspective, which assumes that certain stages in adults development give rise to situations where the "readiness to learn" is optimal. These stages or certain moments is said to be closely related to age. This paper concerns "the proper time for recruitment and participation in learning" as a definition to the "readiness to learn" concept. In this paper "readiness to learn" refers to how likely a person actively seeks participation in learning activities and the triggering factors that actualize this "readiness".

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2. Background and assumptions

The topic “readiness to learn” is closely related to motivation and reasons for participation in learning activities; which is a much studied topic in the adult education research field (Cross, 1982; Bandura, 1986; Rubenson, 1976). Although adults often have specific motives and seems to be very motivated for learning (Rubenson, 1976; Cross, 1982), other aspects must also be in place in order to really effectuate these motives (Tønseth, 2011). In order to explain why adults participated in learning activities, Aslanian and Brickell (1980) was testing a hypothesis assuming that transitions, such as job changes, marriage, the arrival of children and retirement, required adults to seek new learning. They found by telephone interview that 83 % of 744 adult learners named some transition in their lives as the motivating factor that caused why adult participate.

In order to explain adult’s readiness to learn, lifespan theories developed by Lindeman (1926), Havighurst (1953, 1972), Erikson (1959), Maslow (1972, 1987) and Knowles (1988, 1989) have been commonly used. All these theories assume that life is divided into phases or stage that is related to age, with certain indicators or happenings occurring at each stage. According to these theories, the exact starting point for participation will be connected to changes or special situation in adult’s lives that commonly occurs at a certain age (Havighurst, 1953; Cross, 1982; Levinson, 1978; Knowles, 1988). Havighurst (1972) identified the developmental tasks associated with different stages of growth that give rise to a person’s readiness to learn different things at different times and to create “teachable moments”. One of Lindeman’s (1926) key assumptions about adult learners was that adults are motivated to learn when they experience needs and interests that learning will satisfy. Adult’s orientation to learning is life-centred, which means that every adult finds themselves in specific situations with respect to work, recreation, family life, community life etc. Situations which call for adjustments (Lindeman, 1926). Also Knowles et al (1998) claimed that adults become ready to learn things they need to know and do in order to cope effectively with real-life situations. Cross’ “response-loop model” merges several theories and models about adult learning (Cross, 1982). Dimensions in the model is the individual self-perception, educational attitudes, consideration of the learning importance and goal achievement, life phase/-crises, possibilities and barriers and access to information.

A contradiction to these well known life phase theories is well described, for instance in a report concerning lifelong learning in Norway (Ministry of Education and Research 2007). In this report several statements contradicts the life phase perspective as a foundation for adult participation in learning. *“The development in the modern society is so rapid and it demands for competence is so high, that learning can not longer be limited to certain life-phases. Learning has to take place continuously, in different contexts”* (ibid). A number of researchers have turned to theories of late and post modernity to account for these trends (Edwards, 1997; Bauman, 2005; Field, 2006). For instance Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992), who are reflexive modernisation theorists, suggests that individuals must continually cope with recurrent and complex transitions in life, where learning is actualized.

The focus in this paper is research findings related to certain situational triggering factors that causes recruitment and participation in adult learning, as adult’s selves describes it. These findings actualizes the contradiction between lifespan-theories and certain ages as the central trigger, versus new research indicating situational triggers as the most important. The research question is: What are the situational triggering factors that lead to participation in learning among adults? Are such triggering factors always tightened to certain stages in adults lives?

3. Life span and age as triggering factors – readiness to learn

The core contribution that life-span development theories gives, are the andragogical principles of adult learning that clarifies and refining adult readiness to learn. The premise of all these theories is that there are certain predictable types of changes that occur throughout an adult’s life. Life change is seen as adult’s primary driving force for learning. As the core principle of andragogy, adults are most ready to learn when the learning meets an immediate

life need, and are most motivated when it fills and internal that need. Predictable changes in adult' life then means that such changes occurs in a certain pattern that one can spot in an actual phase in life as adults mature. Grounded in the premise that certain predictable types of changes occur in an adults life, these changes is seen as triggers to learning need. As a part of such predictable changes, Knowles (1988) identified five andragogical assumptions of the adult learner related to life-phases and age:

- As a person matures, he or she moves from dependency to self-directedness.
- Adults draw on their experiences to aid their learning.
- The learning readiness of adults is closely related to the assumption of new social roles.
- As a person learns new knowledge, he or she wants to apply it immediately in problem solving.
- As a person matures, he or she receives motivation to learn from internal factors.

An essential point in both Knowles (ibid) and Maslows (1987) theory was the assumption that the development stages in our life give rise to the readiness to learn and to teachable moments. Even so, Maslow placed special emphasis on the role of inner safety and not on situational triggering factors.

Perhaps the best known of this group of theories describing the life course, is Levinson's phase theory (1978). Levinson divides adult life into three phases: early adulthood (17-45), middle adulthood (40-60) and late adulthood (60+). Life then consists of alternating periods of stability and transitions. Each era brings with it certain predictable tasks and each transition between eras certain predictable challenges.

Table 1. Levinsons (1978) phases

Developmental period	Age	Task
Early adult transition	17-22	Explore possibilities and make tentative commitments
Entering the adult world	22-29	Create first major life structure
Age 30 transition	29-33	Reassess life structure
Settling down	33-40	Create second life structure
Midlife transition	40-45	Ask "what have I done with my life?"
Entering middle adulthood	45-50	Crane new life structure
Age 50 transition	50-55	Minor adjustments to middle life structure
Culmination of middle adulthood	55-60	Build second middle life structure
Late life transition	50-65	Prepare for retirement and old age
Late adulthood	65+	Create late life structure and deal with declines of old age

Another widely known and influential theory is Eriksons (1959) theory of identity development. Erikson proposed that adults' identity develops through resolution eight stages.

Erikson believes that during successful early adolescence, mature time perspective is developed and the young adult acquires self-certainty as opposed to self-consciousness and self-doubt. Young adults come to experiment with different roles (through the first 5 stages). In later adolescence, clear sexual identity - manhood or womanhood - is established. The adolescent seeks leadership and gradually develops a set of ideals (stage 6-7). If these seven psychosocial crises have been successfully resolved, the mature adult develops the peak of adjustment, integrity and independence. The adult has now found a well-defined role and self-concept in life. The adult can be intimate without strain, guilt, regret, or lack of realism; and he is proud of what he/she creates - the children, work or hobbies. If one or more of the earlier psychosocial crises have not been resolved, adults may view their self and their life with disgust and despair (ibid).

These theories are merely descriptive of typical and predictable changes experienced by adults. There is no normative hierarchy intended, so one phase is not better than another. The theories seek merely to describe typical or expected changes. Many of the life-span role development theories fit into this category (Knowles, 1988). When thinking about my life and the many changes I have experienced, many of them seems to be typical for many adults – going to school, studying, setting out a home, attending working life, getting married, having children, death of a parent, etc. But is there some predictable developmental order implied here, or is it simply a sequence of events?

4. Newer theories about triggering factors. Continuous adjustments and lifelong learning.

Adult learning research as well as policy and practice have been strongly influenced by postmodernism (Field, 2006). Postmodernism has changed our focus, the way of thinking and broadened the domain and sites for learning. The postmodern society is associated with growth in the service industry and new models for production, globalisation and technological growth. In the postmodern society there is an increasing focus on the consumer, on lifestyles and identities (Field, 2006). An increased focus on individual rights, choices and self-realisation has paved the way for lifelong learning as an individual project. It has become an individual responsibility to make adequate provision for the creation and preservation of one's own human capital. Investment in learning and financing, has become primary an individual responsibility (Marginson, 1997).

In times of postmodernity the search for identity represents the struggle to escape from uncertainty (Bauman, 2005). However, identities, especially in the field of practice, are in transition. One reason is the change of policy and public commitment. As Filander (2005) has demonstrated, the transformation of public service into private-like enterprises under a new public management rule has deprived many of a fixed and settled identity as 'public sector benefactors'. As a result of rapid technological, economic, cultural and social change, individuals are constantly faced with transitions in their personal and professional circumstances. Governments exhort their citizens to prepare for a life of permanent adaptation and flexibility. Education in adult life becomes both a resource for individuals seeking to promote their employability and mobility, and at the same time a cause of further uncertainty and risk (Field, 2009).

The occurring growth and fragmentation of the adult education field, and at the same time, new modes of teaching and learning (Jarvis et al, 1998), are also part of the postmodern condition. A characteristic of this condition is described as de-differentiation, i.e. "a general decentring of educational authority, control and provision and the breakdown of clear demarcations between different sectors of education and between education and cognate field" (Usher et al, 1997). The results are "diversified fields of education" (Carr-Hill, Carron & Peart, 2001), which questions the conception of adult education or lifelong learning as a formally constituted field. Since learning now is increasingly recognized as located in a variety and diversity of social practices, these concepts are best understood as metaphors that brings to the fore the boundlessness of learning (Usher et al, 1997). Edwards (1997) has therefore suggested "moorland" as more appropriate, resonant and resourceful in relation to the ongoing processes of globalisation and postmodernity. In this "moorland", learning becomes a continuously ongoing "activity" in every context adults participates. The concept of phases and age-related changes actualising learning can in these circumstances be very difficult to spot.

Knowledge about how the individual interprets the world cannot by itself give an understanding of the readiness to learn. Only when we include structural factors and analyze the interaction between them and the individual conceptual apparatus does an interpretation become possible. Adults' readiness to learn and the barriers preventing it - in its broadest interpretation - can be understood in terms of societal processes and structure, institutional processes and structure and individual consciousness and activity. Applying this to the expectancy-valence paradigm on participation (Rubenson, 1977), one has to take into account the crucial "circumstances" in which expectancy and value get socially constructed. In accordance with Giddens (1994), there is a dualism between structure and agent and it is important to focus also on processes through which a human being as an active agent governs his/her relationship with adult education.

One reason that modernity is so troubling is that institutionalized reflexivity, according to Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991), exposes all social practices and arrangements to doubt and revision. This applies in the private and intimate sphere as much as in the open and public sphere, to family life and lives as much as to work and politics. Change is so pervasive that the self becomes what Giddens calls "a reflexive project", which must be constantly explored and reconstructed (Giddens, 1991, p.32). In circumstances where the "proportion of life and the proportion of the biography which is open and must be constructed personally is increasing", individuals must continually produce and re-produce their own biographies (Beck, 1992, p.135).

“In the individualized society the individual must therefore learning, on pain of permanent disadvantage, to conceive of himself of herself as the center of action, as the planning office with respect to his/her own biography, abilities, orientations, relationships and so on. Under those conditions of a reflexive biography, “society” must be individually manipulated as a “variable” (Beck, 1992, p. 135).

As an answer to this contradiction to the concept “readiness to learn” and trends towards a more reflexive modernisation perspective, I then assume that; (i) participation in learning activities is no longer so tightened up to situations or happenings related to certain life phases and age in adults lives, but is a result of continuous reflexive practice and adjustments in a rapid changing society. Further I question; (ii) does this means that adults “readiness to learn” merge the demand for continuous adjustments in the knowledge-society?

5. Method

The findings are based on qualitative interviews among 25 adults participating in different adult education programs, from short leisure-time courses to longer university educational programs. Included in the interviews there were 6 males and 19 females. The interviews lasted for 1-2 hours. All adults participated in *voluntary* education, and the different education programs were arranged by different adult education organizers and the courses varied from classroom lecture, correspondence course to data based distance education.

Some of the courses were prestigious, in the sense that they had strict requirements in relation to admission and completion. Some courses were structured in a way that they made great demands in terms of being able to work independently and structured. First and foremost the intention with the interviews was to investigate the whole process, from recruitment to finishing the courses. Therefore the participants were interviewed three times during their participation. Adult learning motives, recruitment and choice of courses, organization of everyday life where learning activities are included, support and counselling, financing, mastering and outcomes of adult education where the central themes. In connection to this I also tried to identify and describe life situation and the reasons for picking the actual time for participation. The data material used in this article is a part of the data material used in my doctoral thesis.

Table 2. Selection of respondents. Organizer, course, age, family, previous education and occupation. N = 25

	<i>School/organizer</i>	<i>Course</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Family</i>	<i>Earlier education*</i>	<i>Work</i>
Marit B	Online School	Psychology	42	No family or children	Low Education	Project manager
Hilde	Online School	Pedagogy	36	Family with one child	Medium Education	Not working
Christopher	Online School	Management and organization	28	Partner. No children	High Education	Team leader
Solfrid	Online School	Health and Care	45	Single parent. One child	Low Education	Health and care
Kenneth	Online School	IT-study	32	Family with two children	High Education	IT consultant
Sigrid	Online School	Management and organization	27	No family or children	Medium Education	Audiologist
Laila	Online School	Psychology	49	Family with three children	High Education	Teacher
Rune	Correspondence courses	Supervisor school	40	Divorced. Three children	Low Education	Railway worker

* Low education corresponds to the primary/elementary, middle education equivalent education at the secondary school level, while high education college/university education.

Mia	Online School	Psychology	35	Family with four children	High Education	Not working
Kjellfrid	Online School	Management and organization	38	Divorced (new partner) two children	Medium Education	Petrol station
Kathrine	Online School	Secondary school	30	Family with one child	Medium Education	Post-official
Ellen	Correspondence courses	Pedagogy	24	No family or children	High Education	Teacher
Nils	Correspondence courses	Janitor school	50	No family or children	Low Education	Janitor
Ann	Online School	Business and Economics	29	Family with two children	Medium Education	Economy Secretary
Marit	High school for adults	Health and care	45	Family with two children	Low Education	Not working
Tor	education association	Boatmanship license	48	Family with two n foster children	Medium Education	Electrician
Solveig	education association	Supervisor school	45	Divorced (new partner). Two children.	Medium Education	Team Leader agent
Hege	High school for adults	Secondary school	31	Family with two children	Low Education	Not working
Kjersti	Private high school	Secondary school	30	Family with one child	Low Education	Not working
Hanne	Education association	Secretarial and office	39	Family with two children	Low Education	Secretary
Eilif	Education association	Spanish course	35	Partner. No children	High Education	IT consultant
Berit	Education association	Administration and Management	45	Divorced (new partner). Four children	Medium Education	Office clerk
Siv	Education association	Law	22	Lived with her sister. No children	Medium Education	Farmer
Silvie	Education association	Interior and design	31	Divorced. Two children	Medium Education	Seller
Karin	Education association	Cleaning	38	Family with three children.	Low Education	Cleaner

The qualitative interview material includes 25 respondents. This is acceptable amount. It weakens the material, however, that about half of the interviews were conducted by telephone and then by interviewing people who participated in correspondence courses or Online. Although it was a challenge to achieve the same confidential conversation on the phone, which is achieved face to face, so we were aware of this in interviews and spent time in relation to creating a foundation for a confidential conversation. As in other studies based on voluntary participation, there is a risk that those who join are gifted individuals who like to expose themselves and who are confident in their own abilities to communicate. The interviewees conveyed via the organizers, could also be interviewing people who organizers said could give a positive impression of the course by promoting and providing good references. It may also be that those who volunteered, felt that they had something special they wanted to convey, that they had a special story to tell. Such items include, however, in the general debate about who agree to participate in surveys.

Among the interviewees there is a gender imbalance with more women than men. The average age among the respondents was 37 years and this constitutes a heterogeneous group located in different life situations. Some of them have children they must prioritize time related to, while others have no family obligations. Some are married or having partners, while others are single. Some are employed full-time while others have education and learning as their main occupation. Several of the participants were highly educated from before.

Although the motives for participation often were work related, the participation in learning was a direct result of special life situation were participation in learning was seen as a solution or a mean to change or to repair a problem or a dilemma in life. To create a new life or a new orientation in life was a fundamental goal for nearly all adults.

6. Findings

In questioning about adult learning motives, the immediate answers to the question about reasons for participation were mostly related to something they wanted to accomplish related to work; a new job, advancement in current job or increased salary. In addition to these reasons I also discovered that there often were special situations or occasions in their life's that update and actualized the need for education and learning. All the respondents reported one or several specific events, changes or situations that actualized participation. One important reason was the actual life situation, with children who have grown more independent. This brought more time that they could fill with new activities (Solveig, Tor, Kjellfrid, Berit, Solfrid, Rune, Laila, Sigrid). Divorce and breakups were also reported as a direct cause (Solveig, Silvie, Berit, Rune, Kjellfrid), in addition reorganization and downsizing in the workplace was cited as a direct cause (Rune, Marit, Kathrine, Nils) that made learning relevant. The triggers that other respondents pointed out was that they had got some sort of financial support (Hege, Christopher, Eilif, Hanne, Karin, Kenneth, Marit B) that they have not had before, they had friends (Marit, Kjersti), relatives (Siv) or coworkers (Ellen, Hilde, Ann, Kathrine) taking the same course and who inspired and influenced them. Retraining due to illness/rehabilitation (Kjersti, Mia and Nils) was also mentioned as another causative factor. Such triggers seemed to be what was needed to start an education or a course that you have had a desire for long or short time. Although there were more women than men in the sample, the women commonly reported changes in the private sphere as triggers, while men reported events or changes related to work as triggers.

6.1. Now it's my turn!!

Time left over after giving priority to the husband or partners career and that one's own children has become more independent, seems to be one of the triggering factor actualizing participation in learning activities which is most connected to life stage and age. Children getting more independent are in some way a predictable change in adult's life, though letting one's own education step aside in favor of the partners career development maybe not always a predictable cause.

Hanne said:

"To be thirty years old means that one feels more self-confident. I also feels that I much more knowledge than before. Connected to this ... the latest eight years I have been taking care of my kids and my home – nothing else. When my husband had received the education and profession he wanted, I thought Now it is my turn in life. I thought that I had the opportunity to do something about my life."

Hege said:

"My husband for example, he thinks it's okay for me to take this course and supports me. I have supported him through his education and work – so it's payback time. The kids thought it was a little odd that I should not be at home when they got home as usual, but they learned fast to take care of themselves and to participate in some housework."

Hege refers to the expectations from her children and her own conscience that dictates her thought that she really should have been more at home and done her "duties" there as usual. The legitimacy of releasing more time for study and put greater demands to the children in the family when mom not always present, is compensated by the fact that she gets full support from her husband. The choice of participation in learning involves that both Hege herself and her family have to change their daily routines. The family gets a little less time together, and some of the practical duties and tasks in their household had to be distributed in a different way than before. She sees this as a positive opportunity to change the distribution of housework and to involve the children in a different way than

before. The same release of time in their families is also true for many of the women I interviewed, such as Solveig, Tor, Kjellfrid, Berit, Solfrid, Rune, Laila and Sigrid.

6.2. Divorce – a new starting point

The reason that Solveig joined the Supervisor course was that her husband had moved out. She found out that she had to do something with her life, both in terms of giving her life a new meaning and direction, as well as to demonstrate to her selves and others that she actually managed to stand on her own. To increase confidence in herself and make new contacts and friends in a new environment, the course has become a kind of guiding factor. Solveig says:

“I found that I needed a little more education. Because I really began to work in an early age, while my husband was finishing his education. So when he moved out last year, I found out that now I have to do something for myself too. Then I got hold of the course catalog and began to look there. “

With the help from friends and a psychologist after the breakup from her boyfriend, she found that more education would be a way to start over and create a more independent life. It was her turn to bet on herself in order to create the basis for a “new” life, with emphasis on security, recognition and autonomy.

Divorce was also the direct cause that Silvie began at her course. She needed some time to think about her life and she came to the conclusion that she wanted to create a new direction in life. For her, the Interior school has been a dream for a long time. She has always been interested in colors, decor, design and inside renovation. Silvie is very clear about her goal by attending the course, and the end she wants to start her own business. She likes to decide and have influence, and she wants to experience some freedom and flexibility at work. Silvie wants to combine vocational training in cleaning and interior, and offer her services as a consultant in different construction projects, where the combination of interior constructions and effective cleaning is something she believes is a neglected area. Silvie says:

“It was always a dream I had really. I found that I would reboot after the divorce, and create a new life for me and my children. [...] I have always been very interested in colors, design, interior, and renovation. So I imagined a new opportunity to get a new job and a fresh start somehow.”

She feels that life has taken a new direction that she will exploit and use to their advantage. She will create a separate platform and a “new life”.

6.3. Job cuts - adjustment with new opportunities

Rune has a job at the railway company. He has received some signals from management that the tasks he is doing today will not be relevant in a few years. He would thus be redundant and must obtain a new job. He said:

“I only know that the job I have now gone on a four year time. Then I make sure to get me a slightly different perspective. So in addition to this supervisor course, I read mathematics for high school. I get paid education and I hope maybe to get a severance package with one year of continuing education. I can use it to get myself a new professional platform.”

Because of the lack of formal education, Marit was not allowed to perform all types of duties included in her job performance and therefore she did not get the responsibility that the job demanded. She said:

“I had to formal educated in relation to the tasks I should do and did in my work.”

She experienced to be at a standstill in the workplace and the boss asked if she would be interested in some more formal education. The employer was very pleased that she took the initiative to participate in this program and decided to pay the course fee. It was several parallel circumstances that together actualized learning for her. The triggering factors for her were that she lacked formal education, she received support from employer and her daughter started training together with the same curriculum and textbooks at another institution. It gave her inspiration and motivation to start. Rune, Marit, Kathrine, Nils also mentioned Job change as the triggering cause that made learning relevant. Other informants mentioned inspiration from friends (Marit, Kjersti), relatives (Siv) or coworkers (Ellen, Hilde, Ann, Kathrine) as triggers.

6.4. Health difficulties – adjustments to a new life direction and new possibilities

Mia has been fully employed ever since she completed basic training 19 years ago. Because of health problems, she could not continue her job and she was in a prolonged sick leave. A new profession where she could work and experience success in spite of betrayal brushes health was needed. She wants to become a consultant and conducting training in organizational culture and organizational psychology.

“So the health problems really gave me a push in a new direction, and a sudden space where I could think about my life and my opportunities.”

Kjersti had worked as a florist for several years, when her back gave her health problems and caused periods of long-term sick leave. Using counselors at the employment services, she got the opportunity to retrain and considering changing profession. She decided that she would try a more sedentary office job, where her back strain becomes less painful.

“I hope that this opportunity to new education can help ensure that I stay healthy and that I can contribute and stay in working life much longer.”

6.5. Unexpected funding opportunities

Solveig have been promised to get reimbursed the course costs from her employer. She justifies the employers payment with the relevant skills that she achieves that is related to the job and gives credit to her employer. She says:

«I have spent much money already on this course. I expect, that my employer reimbursed the costs after application (...) Both the colleagues and the boss supports me in several ways. I get the acceptance and the time to study, but there is no on standing cheering.”

In addition to financial support, motivational support from the work environment and time to study perceived as positive for Solveig. For her, it gives a kind of legitimacy and understanding that she spent some of my time to read. She expects that the employer will pay for the skills the employer would benefit from- that is her triggering factor and her motivation. Also Chris' employer has agreed to fund the course costs. Christopher says:

" The employer covers the expenses and by that he motivated me to take this course (...) I have my own computer at home, but sometimes I can also use the computer at work . (...) Not during working hours, but in the evenings. I see that as very positive and supportive and facilitating factors"

Christopher agreement with the employer means that he can use the computer equipment at work but not use working time to study. He attends a course that is expected to provide an expertise that the employer will have a direct benefit from the event, and thereby experience acceptance and support from employers and colleagues, but at the same time they also experience the pressures and expectations (in order to complete with good results), claims

(if not taking the course too fast and not use of working hours) and the promise of reward (such as you get a refund, a new position and/or higher wages). The employer may at times have a less committed worker, who may also want something more absences and more in need of relief at work. The statements show that there are certain expectations that employers should get something in return by investing in employee training and act as supportive way. Other respondents that also pointed out that they had got some sort of financial support was Hege, Eilif, Hanne, Karin, Kenneth and Marit B.

7. Discussion

By interviewing adults who participated in different educational courses, I discovered that there often were special circumstances that functioned as triggering factors that made adults take the final step towards participation in different learning activities. Released time and time left over for study, divorce and breakups, reorganization at work, dismissal, illness and financing opportunities was occasions/triggering factors that in some way demanded new orientation in life and in other ways gave the opportunity to realize a long time interest for learning and education. In one way such triggers forced adult in taking more education even if they are not as motivated, but for some adults it was what was needed to embark an education or a course that they had a desire for a long time. These dichotomy can be related to Knowles book "The modern Practice of Adult Education, From Pedagogy two Andragogy" (1988), where the focus is on individualistic theory with emphasis on intrinsic motivation and autonomous adults, where the individual needs orientation is the basis for adult learning. As opposed to this, the focus directed towards a more radical and Marxist-inspired tradition, where the triggers are related to empowerment and structural triggers that contribute social change, as Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992) pointed out. Mezirow (1991) and his transformational theory also attempts to integrate both the individual and collective/structural orientation. This theory applies primarily to individual learning, which indirectly may have collective change goals (ibid). As I interpret it, we find the various theoretical perspectives linked to the goals of lifelong learning (i) personal fulfillment and development throughout life, (ii) active citizenship and social inclusion and (iii) employment, wealth creation and social change. The triggers mentioned in this study are certainly connected to these goals – for instance can a divorce drive the persons involved towards a new direction in life and to develop themselves as persons through learning and education.

Few triggers mentioned in the sample could directly be connected to a specific age or life- phase. These triggering factors were more related to different events and circumstances occurring in life. Divorce, illness, changes in the workplace is not necessarily predictable and limited age-related changes as a part of Levinsons' (1978) phases. What is more predictable is that small kids are getting older and more self-reliant and that this release more time for learning. This shows that some of the triggering factors may in some way be age and phase related, but that others can be unpredictable and not really related and limited to a certain age and life phases.

The findings show that triggers are often related to transitions in adult's life. A divorce means transition from married to single, two-parent to single parent. From employee to unemployed, from one job to another, from healthy to sick. This transitions all means changes with certain risks and un-certainties, as Beck (1992) emphasizes. One of the most central theories about adults motives for learning are focusing on life-crisis, or particular happenings in adult's lives that makes adults re-value their own lives and life-situation in order to find new solutions or new direction in life (Erikson, 1959 and Levinson's phase theory 1978, 1986). Life situations that create a need to know is also something that Knowles et al (1998) and Havinghurst (1972) emphasized. This perspective is something that (Mezirow, 1991) also emphasize in his transformative learning theory. However Mezirow focused on the learning process and not primary on recruitment to learning activities. Changes in life situations, follows what Mezirow (1991) termed as a disorienting dilemma, which seems to be a catalyst in transformative learning processes. The causal conditions that leads to transformative learning begin with a disorienting dilemma such as a life event, an adult education experience, or a new or revised life role (Kroth & Boverie, 2000).

In a continuously interaction between individual needs and interests and the environments requirements and expectations, adults seems to be in a state of continuous readiness for acquiring new knowledge. There are transitions and events in life that cause us to question about the world and ourselves and this questioning is

fundamental to adult learning (Mezirow, 1991; Jarvis et al, 1998). These events are not necessarily linked to a specific life-phase, but is more about reorientation and a reassessment and restructuring throughout life (cf. Edwards, 1997). This suggests that we perhaps should do some rethinking about adults learning, in the way that perhaps adults enter the so-called autonomous stage much earlier than before, while they are young pupils at school and young students at the university. Early in life we learn about our opportunities and requirements in relation to reflexivity (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992).

Good relations, healthiness and employment are important for our identity. Fundamental changes in life means identity disorders that one would strive to enhance or reinforce, in order to create safety and security (Beck, 1992). Such changes mean reorientation in life. Today, divorce and partner change are not a strange thing – it happens all the time. So we all need to be more adaptable and willing to change. At the same time we can more freely shape our identity regardless of class, which previously increasingly posed a straitjacket, that could not be changed (Giddens, 1991). The new modernity poses new challenges - but also greater manoeuvrability.

The andragogical theory is based on earlier AE-theories. The AE ideal assumes that individuals take control of their learning, and focus on the reality of limitations in taking control of their own decision-making. In making decisions related to participation, adults will fully determine the learning needs required to achieve their personal goal(s). Knowles (1988) claims that adults become ready to learn when their life situation creates a “need to know”. But as the findings indicate and as Giddens (1991) points out, age will increasingly be less suited to determine the stage of life. It is the individual and his or her situation or life cycle that more commonly determines the individual’s needs and wants.

As an answer to the initially described contradiction I can say that; (i) participation in learning activities is not automatically tightened up to situations or happenings related to certain life phases and age in adults lives, but is also a result of continuous reflexive practice and adjustments in a rapid changing society. This means that adults “readiness to learn” in some extent merges the demand for continuous adjustments in the knowledge-society. Even so, the findings show that there are both individual and structural triggers, related to both to the private and intimate sphere as much as to the open and public work related sphere.

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